

A Beginner's Guide to Growing Heathers

It seems to be a too commonly held belief that, if your soil isn't acid, you can't grow heathers. Not true – **Everyone can grow heathers!**

If your soil is light, sandy and acid, then you are very fortunate. However, if you are not one of these lucky few, you can still have a colourful, healthy, display of these beautiful plants - you just need to know which ones you can or can't grow successfully. If you are not sure whether your soil is acid, neutral, or alkaline, simple and inexpensive soil testing kits are available from most garden centres.

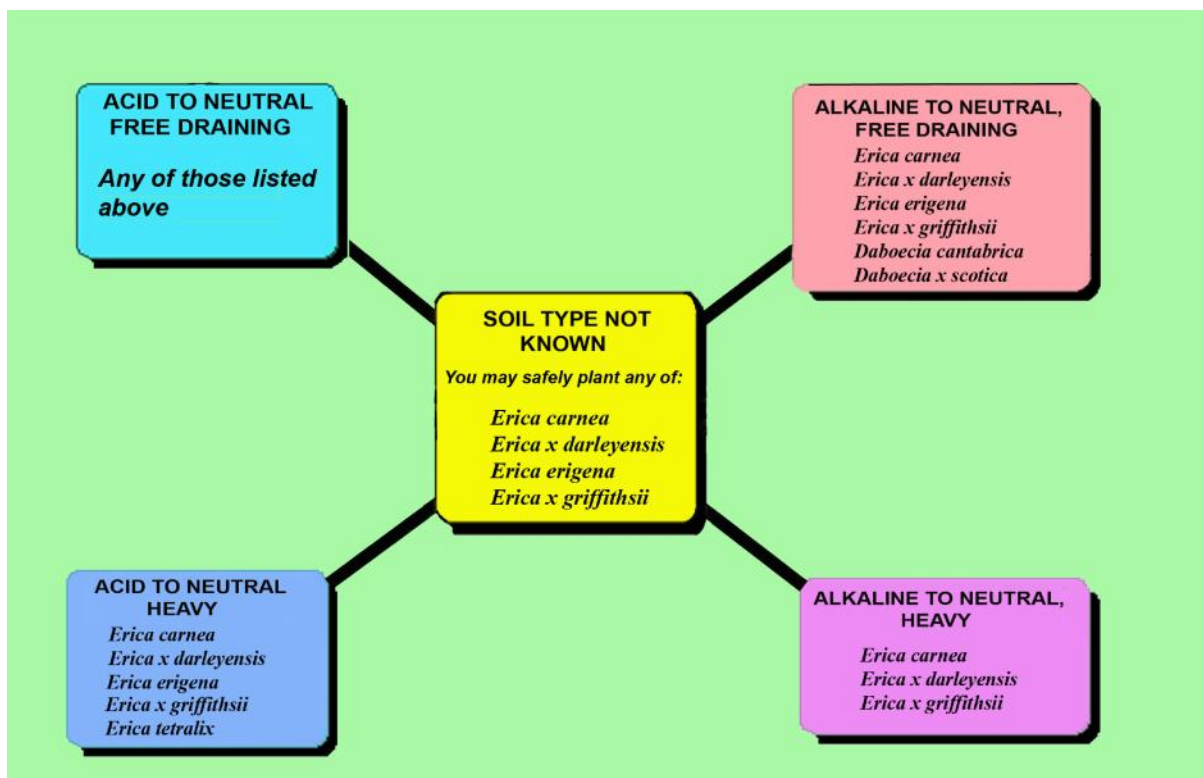
Many heather growers indicate on their plant labels whether the heathers are suitable for acid or alkaline soils, which is very useful. But, even if they don't, by following a couple of simple guide lines, you can ensure that you buy plants suitable for your own soil conditions.

The right plants for your situation

First - look at the first two names on the plant label, which (unless you have found something unusual) will almost certainly be one of the following: *Calluna vulgaris*, *Daboecia cantabrica*, *Daboecia x scotica*, *Erica carnea*, *Erica ciliaris*, *Erica cinerea*, *Erica erigena*, *Erica tetralix*, *Erica vagans*, *Erica x darleyensis*, *Erica x griffithsii* or *Erica x watsonii*. These are the **species/hybrid** names.

Second - from the chart below, find which description fits your soil situation most closely, and note which of the heather species will succeed for you. Unless you know your soil is acid it is best not to be tempted to buy un-labelled plants.)

These are not the only species/hybrids you may come across at garden centres and nurseries, but are certainly the most common ones. For a full, **descriptive list** of cultivars of *Callunas*, *Daboecias* and *Ericas* go to the heading '**Heathers**', situated on the black bar at the top of the Home Page. This list includes rarer cultivars that are more difficult to obtain. For **pictures**, click on the 'picture bar' on the Home Page.



The above recommendations apply to the UK, or any country whose average winter temperatures do not fall below about -12o C. If average temperatures are below this, then many species will still thrive, and you can obtain specific recommendations in relation to your particular climate from The Heather Society

Choosing your heathers

Calluna vulgaris (Scottish heather or Ling): Flowers from late summer until well into autumn and there is a vast range of colours to choose from, both in flower and foliage. Heights range from around 60cm, down to cultivars that hug the ground - with all shapes and sizes in between. Needs an acid soil.

Erica ciliaris (Dorset heath): In bloom from mid-summer until autumn. A very attractive heather, with flowers in long colourful racemes (not as widely available as the others).. Heights range from 30cm, down to around 15cm. Needs an acid soil

Erica cinerea (Bell heather): Flowers from early summer to early autumn. It probably has brightest range of colours of all the summer flowering heathers. Heights range from 45cm to around 20cm. *Erica cinerea* does best in a light sandy soil, which doesn't get too wet in winter. Needs an acid soil

Erica tetralix (Cross-leaved heath): Flowers from early summer until autumn. In the wild it grows naturally in boggy places, but will stand much drier conditions in the garden. The dainty red, pink or white flowers are held in clusters at the top of 15 to 20cm stems. Needs an acid soil

Daboecia cantabrica (St Dabeoc's heath): Flowers from June until late autumn. A very attractive heather, with glossy green leaves and large urn-shaped flowers, in shades of red, pink, lilac and white. Height – around 50cm or less. It will tolerate some shade. Needs an acid soil.

Daboecia x scotica : In effect, this dainty hybrid between *Daboecia cantabrica* and *Daboecia azorica*, is a smaller version of *Daboecia cantabrica*, with similar leaves and flowers, but a more compact habit. Heights range from 35cm down to the diminutive *Daboecia x scotica* 'Ben' at 10cm – perfect for a trough garden. Needs an acid soil, but will tolerate some lime if the soil is well drained.

Erica vagans (Cornish heath): Flowers from mid-summer into autumn. The flowers are long upright racemes, in shades of cerise, pink, cream and white and there are also some beautiful golden foliaged cultivars. Height is around 45cm. Will thrive in alkaline, neutral or acid conditions, as long as the soil it is not deficient in magnesium.

Erica carnea (Mountain heath): Flowers from early winter into late spring – just when colour in the garden is needed most. These are low-growing, ground-covering plants, around 20cm in height, which will give pleasure for many years with the minimum of attention. The flowers range from red, through pink and lilac to white and there are many with superb coloured foliage as well. It is happy in acid, alkaline or neutral soil as long as it isn't too heavy or waterlogged.

Erica erigena (Irish heath): Mostly flowers in early spring, although some cultivars start in late winter and a few even put on a show in late autumn. It is the least hardy of the hardy heathers, but even if it knocked back in an exceptionally hard winter it will usually recover from the base. *Erica erigena* is a useful plant, not only because it is lime tolerant, but because it fills the gap between the winter/spring flowering heathers and the summer flowering ones. It is also more upright growing than many other heathers - very useful to give a bit of height to the border. The plants may also be grown as a hedge Heights range from the well named *Erica erigena* 'Superba' at around 180cm, down to the dainty *Erica erigena* 'Nana' at 20cm. The flowers range from white, through pink, to mauve and salmon, with foliage in shades of green or yellow. Will tolerate acid, neutral or alkaline soils.

Erica x darleyensis : An attractive and very useful heather, It flowers from late autumn, right through until late spring, in many shades of red, pink, lilac and white. There are also some lovely foliage colours. *Erica x darleyensis* cultivars can be quite vigorous, providing good ground cover, which will quickly smother any weeds - just watch out it doesn't also smother its more delicate

neighbours. Heights range from the very vigorous *Erica x darleyensis* 'Arthur Johnson' which can reach 90cm (but can be easily kept under control with an annual trim) down to the more usual height range of 40 to 60cm. It is happy in acid, neutral or alkaline soils.

Erica x griffithsii: This elegant plant has long flower spikes in shades of pink. Some varieties have golden foliage and some are highly scented. Flowering time is from July through to October or November. Heights range from 90cm down to 45cm. Will tolerate acid, neutral or alkaline soils.

Erica x watsonii: A dainty plant, which flowers from June or July into October or November, depending on variety. Flowers range from purple, to lilac and pink, through to white. As a bonus the foliage has attractive coloured tips in the spring. Heights are mainly around 30cm. Needs an acid soil.

Pruning

Calluna, Daboecia, Erica ciliaris, E. cinerea, E. vagans : The general rule is to cut the stems down to the base of the flower stalks once they have finished flowering. However, as some will continue flowering well into November, it is usually best to leave the pruning until early spring to avoid frost damage to the newly cut stems. *Callunas* such as 'Spring Torch' or 'Spring Cream', which have brightly coloured new growth in spring, are better pruned in the autumn.

Eric carnea: Pruning is rarely necessary, unless you need to trim the plants in order to keep them under control in a confined space. However, prune them no later than May, or you may be cutting off next winter's flowers.

Erica erigena : Does not need pruning unless it is necessary to keep to a particular size. In which case, prune when the flowers are fading to avoid trimming off next spring's flowers.

Erica x darleyensis: As these are such exuberant heathers it is advisable to trim them annually, if only to stop them smothering their less vigorous neighbours. Prune no later than May.

If you have a large heather bed or border, pruning individual plants can be a major operation. An easier option, which gives a good result, is to go over them with shears or a hedge trimmer at the recommended time. This annual treatment will keep the plants rejuvenated for many years.

Planting:

Heathers grow best in an open, sunny situation. The winter/spring flowering heathers will tolerate some shade but won't flower as well. Golden foliaged varieties will need to be planted full sun in order to keep their bright colours.

Plant heathers so that the foliage is resting on the ground and no part of the root ball is showing above ground. Compost can be mixed in with the soil when planting, but never plant into pure compost. Make sure to buy ericaceous compost when planting acid-loving plants. Keep well watered until they are established.

So – **Everyone can grow heathers**. It is true that, without an acid soil, you can't grow the full range of these beautiful plants (except in containers). But, if your soil is neutral or alkaline, just forget about the summer heathers, there are plenty of other plants you can grow in the summer. There is absolutely nothing more cheering in those dark days after Christmas, than a bed or border of winter/spring flowering heathers - their brilliant colours brightening the winter gloom and giving several months of pleasure. On sunny days, an added bonus is the sight (and sound) of all the bees foraging among the flowers, grateful for nectar at a time when food is short.

For a more comprehensive introduction to heather growing, a booklet, *Everyone Can Grow Heathers* is available through the Heather Society at £3.50. Better still, join the Heather Society and get the booklet free, plus access to plenty of friendly, helpful, advice from other heather lovers.